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ABSTRACT

Two studies evaluated outcomes of a University Experience (freshman seminar) course to ease the transition to college and enhance student retention at the University of South Florida. In the first study, course evaluations of "typical" USF students (N=540) who completed the course in fall 1998 were overwhelmingly positive in support of the course's usefulness and helpfulness. In the second study, six matched groups of first time in college (FTIC) students from 1990 to 1995 cohorts who participated in the University Experience course were compared to similar students who were not enrolled. Comparison found that the groups who took the course scored consistently, and in many cases, substantially higher on all enrollment variables investigated. These were: retention to spring and 2nd fall semesters, total semesters enrolled, total cumulative student credit hours completed, mean hours enrolled, and spring and 2nd fall semester grade point average. Recommendations for such courses are offered. (DB)

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Evidence Supporting a University Experience Course's Efficacy at a Metropolitan University, and Associated Effective Processes

ED 433 747

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Dolores Vura
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Evidence Supporting a University Experience Course's Efficacy at a Metropolitan University, and Associated Effective Processes

Abstract

Today, most universities provide University Experience (UE) or Freshman Seminar courses to ease the college transition and thereby enhance student retention. This study reviewed outcomes to evaluate UE efficacy at USF. Findings suggest only positive effects. On average, 90% or more of student evaluations supported the course's usefulness and helpfulness. A comparison between "typical" USF students who completed the course (UE) and a carefully matched sample of non-enrollees (Control) from 1990 to 1995 found the UE group to score consistently and in many cases substantially higher on all enrollment variables investigated. It is possible that intrinsic motivational differences exist between the UE groups and the Control groups, however, all findings support the course as beneficial. The paper outlines key course components that may associate with these positive effects.

Introduction

University Experience (UE) Courses (or Freshman Seminar's), either required or not, are widespread at today's universities. A 1994 national survey found that 72% of the 1,001 institutions responding offered such a course (Barefoot, 1996). The University of South Florida (USF), a large, 35,000 student metropolitan public university, offers a seminar course to ease the transition from high school to the university. Since 1987, USF's University Experience course has been a graded, 2-credit, non-required course taught by volunteer faculty with the specification SLS 1101 (UE course). The purpose of the two studies reported here was to determine whether UE effects warranted support for increasing enrollment.

Objectives of USF's University Experience Course

The volunteer faculty who teach the UE course consist primarily of personnel from USF"s Student Services Division, but also include several rank faculty as well as other University personnel. Although the course and assignments differ depending on instructor, all share a set of seven primary objectives and all use the same text, Gardner's *Your College Experience: Strategies for Success*.

The shared course objectives are (1) to introduce students to higher education history and structure. (2) To inform students about USF's history, mission, rules, regulations, organization and student opportunities. (3) To promote positive adjustment to and assimilation into the University. (4) To expose the student to available University resources. (5) To assist students develop a functional set of study, adaptive, coping and survival skills. (6) To help the student make new friends and develop a support network. (7) To challenge the student to become involved in the total "University Experience." Depending on the instructor, these objectives are generally accomplished by course requirements such as: guest speakers (including USF's president), library orientation and use, introduction to available technology resources, attendance and participation in campus events and activities (e.g. Fine Arts recitals, student organizations, student government, etc.), participation in university programs, interviews of professors, visits to various campus centers (e.g. recreation, counseling, etc.), attendance at a diversity event and involvement in a campus-wide scavenger hunt. In addition to activities such as the preceding,

that familiarize the student with University resources and activities, training in study skills, coping skills, adaptive skills, and what are termed "survival" skills is a primary emphasis for all faculty. At the end of the course, several instructors require students to outline their goals, both short term (next year) and long term (five year).

Recently, enrollment in the UE course increased from 269 in 1991/92 to 540 in 1997/98. As a result, and despite the fact that volunteer faculty teach the course, it has begun to require more institutional resources. Therefore, the question was raised whether evidence adequate to warrant further expenditures exists regarding this course's effects. An earlier study (Boudreau & Kromery, 1994) concluded that positive effects had occurred. However, depending on how one views this study's results, one could conclude either that effects occurred, or that no effects occurred. Further, results were confounded by the presence of numerous alternative admits, who receive special support services in addition to the UE course. As a result, the current study was initiated to address the research question using both broader and more controlled approaches, and with more years of data from which to draw conclusions regarding effects.

Methods

Two methods were used to assess the course

Study 1 - Analysis of student course evaluations, and

Study 2 - Between-group comparisons of course completers (UE) and non-enrollees (Control) on several academic performance variables.

The methods and studies are treated as two independent documents in this report.

Study I

Analysis of Student Course Evaluations

Methods

Sample

Five hundred and forty (540) students from 20 University Experience class sections participated in this evaluation in fall 1998 upon which most analyses were conducted. Another 237 from fall 1997 and 41 from spring 1998 were also considered. All respondents are First-Time-In-College students (FTIC).

Instrument

The evaluation form (survey) consists of nine closed-ended questions measure the achievement of the course objectives, and five open-ended questions that call for feedback comments about instructors, in-class activities, out-of-class activities, guest speakers, the textbook, and the overall course experience.

Results and Discussion

Reponses to the closed-ended questions (Table 1) clearly indicate that the great majority of students rate all nine aspects of the course positively. A more detailed analysis of the 1998 responses (N=540) shows that: students strongly agree that the instructors create an interesting classroom atmosphere (64%), the class session is helpful for them to make the transition to become active and effective students (50%), and the course helped them to become aware of academic support services (52%). Although 82% of the students strongly/agree, 18% strongly disagree/disagree that the course helped them to focus on their career goals. Instructors need to reexamine this aspect.

Students rated other aspects of their course experience positively. They strongly agree that the course help them to understand the importance of personal and academic goals and take responsibility for learning (48%), become aware of student support services (46%), skills and knowledge they gained from the course will help them to succeed in college (41%), the course helped them to become familiar with academic requirements at USF (48%), and the course helped them to focus on their career goal (40%). Earlier responses (Spring 1998 and Fall 1997) further demonstrate that the UE course is achieving its main objectives at least as perceived by students.

Table 1

Percent of Respondents Who Agree with Item (Agree or Strongly Agree)

	Fall 1998 (N=540)	Spring 1998 (N=41)	Fall 1997 (N=237)
Course was Interesting and Helpful	91%	95%	94%
Skills learned will help me succeed at USF	88%		
Instructors developed helpful & interesting class atmosphere	93%		
Increased awareness of USF academic requirements	88%	93%	94%
Increased awareness of academic support services	94%	95%	95%
Increased awareness of student support services	88%	95%	90%
Increased awareness of campus activities	85%	95%	91%
Helped understand importance of goals	90%	95%	94%
Helped focus on career goals	82%	91%	83%

Students Comments

Below is a summary of students' feedback and assessment of the course and their experiences.

- Students are most impressed by the friendliness of the instructors and consider them helpful, enthusiastic, and well informed.
- Students appreciate many of the in-class activities, particularly guest speakers in the areas of advising, study skills, career planning, career library, diversity, learning styles and personality.
- Among the in-class activities students appreciate the most are discussions and question time particularly group class assignments and activities, speeches and games.
- Students appreciate most presenters/speakers particularly academic advising, students' health, Counseling Center, and Career Center.
- Among the out-of-class activities students appreciate the most are: attending cultural events, sports events, group work, projects, scavenger hunt, Career Center, Library, Web Luis, and tour around the campus.
- Student feedback for improving the course. Almost one fourth (24%) of the responses expressed satisfaction with the course as it is. Among the suggestions are: more of out-of-class activities and field trips, shorter classes, replace/eliminate the use of the book, less speakers or bring in more interesting speakers, reduce workload, and focus more directly on programs, policies, and facilities at the university.
- Students' opinions about their textbook, time planner, and journal. Eighteen (18%) of the responses expressed positive opinions about the textbook and 26% have some negative opinion of the book. The most positive opinions are: helpful, useful, informative, clear, educational, and appropriate. The most negative opinions are repetitive, unnecessary, outdated, confusing, too basic, dry, big, not used, and waste of money. The time planner's most positive aspects are: helped, enjoyed, useful, and easy

to understand. Its most negative aspects are: not needed, unnecessary, waste of time. Some 9% of the responses expressed positive opinion a of the journal. Among the positive remarks are: useful, helpful, cool, good to communicate with the instructor. Approximately 7% of the responses expressed negative comments such as: did not need, could have used paper, boring, and unnecessary.

Study II

Analysis of Academic Performance Variables

Methods

Between-group comparisons were conducted on six matched groups of First Time in College (FTIC) students (1990 to 1995 cohorts) on the following outcome variables: Graduation rates (1990 to 1993 cohorts), Retention to Spring and 2nd Fall semesters, Total semesters enrolled, Total cumulative student credit hours (SCH) completed, Mean hours enrolled, Spring and 2nd Fall semester GPA (UE grades and hours were excluded from all calculations of credit hours and grades).

To assure comparable groups that reflect relatively typical FTIC students, all students from 1990 to 1995 cohorts who completed a Fall semester UE course (grades A to F), were not alternative admits and had comparable matches among students who did not enroll in a UE course were used as the treatment group (UE). A matched sample (Control) for the obtained UE sample was selected from the non-enrolling students in each cohort using the following criteria: sex, race/ethnicity, mean hours enrolled during first two USF semesters and similar high school GPA (within 0.25 points). Students who transferred to another SUS institution were excluded from both groups. It proved possible to match *circa* 95% of each UE sample using these criteria.

Analyses used to determine whether significant differences occurred were: (1) for percentage comparisons, z tests of differences in proportions, and (2) for continuous variables, t-tests (Results of t-tests were compared with Wilcoxon Rank-sum probabilities and used Satterthwaithe's approximation where unequal n's occurred in outcomes, to reduce the possibility of imprecise p values that might result from heterogeneous variance and other sources).

Definition: alternative admit - student who does not meet minimum Florida SUS entrance requirements.

Limitations:

Possible differential effects across racial/ethnic groups or sexes were not investigated due to small sample sizes.

It is possible that intrinsic motivational differences between the UE groups and the Control groups affected the results.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of Outcome Variables

Table 2 shows that both female and white representation in the matched samples changed through the study's duration. Although the matched samples remained more female, the percentage of whites (and minorities) has come to closely approximate USF's overall percentages.

Table 2

Demographics of FTIC Matched Samples and Total Cohorts

	Matched Sample			Total Cohort		
Cohort	N	% Female	% White	N	% Female	% White
1990	125	60.0%	89.6%	1928	55.5%	81.0%
1991	119	69.7%	89.1%	1825	55.7%	79.7%
1992	132	56.8%	83.3%	2030	55.8%	77.5%
1993	167	68.9%	81.4%	1876	58.2%	73.2%
1994	153	62.1%	78.4%	1772	56.5%	72.1%
1995	153	69.9%	70.6%	2027	57.7%	69.7%

In almost every cohort, for almost all outcome variables, the UE group exhibited higher mean values or percentages than the Control group. Table 3 shows results for five of the eight outcome variables. Short-term effects were consistently significant at the $p < .01$[1] level for retention to the spring semester and at the $p < .05$ level for retention to the 2nd fall semester. Although consistently higher for the UE group, differences in graduation rates were only statistically significant for the 1991 cohort ($p < .05$). The UE group always had higher total hours completed (UE hours excluded) than the Control group, and sometimes substantially so (e.g. an 8.2 hour difference in 1991). However, no significant differences occurred here, perhaps because of the great within-group variability of this variable (ranging between 0 and 200+ completed hours in both groups). USF's retention to the 2nd fall semester of all entering FTIC students ranged between 70% and 74% during this study. Thus, the UE group's 77% to 85% represents a large improvement.

Table 4

Comparison of UE and Matched Control Group on Enrollment Variables

		Graduate[2]		Return Spring		Return 2nd Fall		Mean Semesters		Mean Total Hours	
Cohort	N	UE	Control	UE	Control	UE	Control	UE	Control	UE	Control
1990	125	53.6%	48.0%	94%***	83%	77%	71%	8.2	8.1	82.9	82.8
1991	119	63.9%**	51.3%	95%**	87%	84%**	72%	8.7*	7.7	89.2	81.0
1992	132	47.0%	43.9%	95%**	89%	80%	72%	8.3	7.6	85.1	80.1
1993	167	28.1%	25.1%	95%***	81%	85%***	63%	7.8**	6.9	78.8	71.8
1994	153			96%***	83%	81%**	71%	6.3**	5.8	63.8	61.7
1995	153			96%***	84%	86%**	71%	4.5***	4.0	43.0	39.7

* $p < .10$
** $p < .05$
*** $p < .01$

[1] *Z* tests of differences in proportions were computed.
[2] These are 7 year rates for 1990, 6-year for 1991, 5-year for 1992 and 4-year for 1993.

Table 5 shows mean spring and fall semester GPA results for the matched sample members who returned during those semesters. No significant differences occurred on future GPA (UE grade excluded). However, this may be partly explained by the fact that far greater percentages of the UE group returned in the spring (ranging from 6% to 14% more) and also in the second fall semester, (ranging from 6% to 22% more). In effect, the remaining Control students are a select subset of the original sample. Clearly, in the spring semesters, no differences overall occurred in GPAs. It does appear, however, that starting in 1993, when a change occurred in the UE curriculum, that the UE group began to exhibit comparatively higher GPAs.

Table 5

Spring and 2nd Fall Semester - N Enrolled and Mean GPA by Group

		Spring Semester				2nd Fall Semester			
		Control		UE		Control		UE	
	Begin N	N	Mean GPA	N	Mean GPA	N	Mean GPA	N	Mean GPA
1990	125	104	2.7	118	2.7	89	2.6	96	2.5
1991	119	104	2.7	113	2.7	86	2.7	100	2.5
1992	132	117	2.5	126	2.6	95	2.7**	106	2.4
1993	167	136	2.4	158	2.6**	105	2.5	142	2.6
1994	153	127	2.6	147	2.6	109	2.7	124	2.8
1995	153	128	2.5	147	2.6	108	2.6	132	2.8

* $p < .10$
** $p < .05$
*** $p < .01$

Conclusions and Recommendations

This findings of these studies support the provision of continued and perhaps even increased resources for this course. In both areas investigated, the UE course related to positive effects and evaluations.

Recommendations Regarding Effective Processes

Among the procedures used by USF's UE faculty, readers may wish to consider researching and possibly adding one or both of the following processes to UE courses at their institution.

- Have students outline their university goals and objectives and set timelines for their accomplishment.
- Help integrate students into a smaller community within the university. Tinto (1998), indicates that researches conducted at numerous and varied institutions support interest groups in which a group of students enroll in several courses together. Benefits for the students include: increased community involvement, consistent study groups or partners, shared responsibility for learning, and greater involvement both in- and out-of-class.

According to Tinto, when UE courses stimulate such groups, these community effects tend to occur spontaneously.

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